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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - DECEMBER 15, 2006

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¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

¶2. Lukashenko, Putin Meet

On December 15, President Lukashenko traveled to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin. They attended a session of the Supreme State Council of the Belarusian-Russian Union State to discuss the Union State's 2007 budget. According to initial press reports, bilateral discussions offered no indication that Russian energy resources will continue to be available at the currently

low prices.

13. Sudanese Foreign Minister to Visit

On December 14, Belarusian MFA Spokesman Andrey Popov announced that Sudanese Foreign Minister Lam Akol Ajawin is to arrive in Belarus on December 17. Ajawin is expected to meet with top-ranking Belarusian officials, visit large industrial enterprises and sign a number of bilateral agreements during his five-day stay in Belarus.

14. Chinese Military Delegation Arrives in Minsk

A delegation of the People's Liberation Army of China, led by deputy commander of the Beijing military district Colonel General Fu Tinggui, visited Minsk December 8-11 to develop military cooperation between Belarus and the People's Republic of China. Tinggui met with Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev and visited the Military Academy of Belarus.

15. GOB and UNICEF Discuss Cooperation

GOB officials and representatives of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) met at the MFA December 8. Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Gaysenok stated that strategies on healthcare, food, and water access for children, as well as UNICEF's mid-term strategic plan for 2006 through 2009 had been adopted by Belarus. Gaysenok also claimed an important role in UNICEF Executive Board's decision to simplify and harmonize the rules and procedures of country program implementation and reporting.

16. Europeans Urge GOB to Release Kozulin

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On December 9, the German Embassy in Minsk issued a statement on behalf of the EU Presidency citing the 25-nation bloc's deep concern over Aleksandr Kozulin's health. The European Union also called on the Belarusian authorities to "promptly release" the former presidential candidate and renewed a request to visit Kozulin in jail. On December 14, independent media reported that the Czech MFA called for Kozulin's release and for immediate medical assistance from the Belarusian authorities.

17. MP Gaydukevich Appointed MFA Special Representative

On December 14, Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov appointed leader of the Liberal Democratic Party Sergey Gaydukevich as special representative for relations with European parliamentary organizations. His stated task is to establish contacts with European legislative and executive bodies while maintaining his seat in parliament. Gaydukevich --who was a nominal "opposition" candidate for President in March 2006 but is close to the regime -- is on the EU's visa ban list, and told media that he was unsure as to when he would leave for Brussels.

CIVIL SOCIETY

18. Activist Fined for Newspaper Distribution

On December 8, police fined opposition activist Boris Khamaida for distributing newspapers in an "unauthorized place." Khamaida was selling Vitebsky Kuryer, Narodnaya Volya, Nasha Niva, Svaboda and the magazine Arche, as well as several copies of articles by Zenon Poznyak near the regional government building in the center of Vitebsk. Khamaida has been fined several times this year for similar alleged violations. He continued to sell papers after the latest trial.

19. Factory Workers Walk Out Over Low Pay

On December 8, approximately 25 employees of a footwear factory in Vitebsk walked off the job demanding a raise. They resumed

work later that day, but according to one striker plan to negotiate with the company's administration next week. The company's administration told reporters that there had been no strike and that those employees who were not working were on their "lunch break."

¶10. Polish Community's Magazine Editor Jailed

On December 13, authorities sentenced "Magazyn Polski" magazine layout editor Aleksei Salei to seven days in jail on charges of petty hooliganism and disobeying police officers after being arrested. Salei had left his office on December 12 when several plainclothes police officers arrested him and forced him into a vehicle. Neither family nor co-workers knew of his arrest until Salei's mother attempted to file an abduction complaint with the local authorities. The magazine's staff has backed Anzelika Borys, an activist considered by Poland as the legitimate chair of the Union of Belarusian Poles.

¶11. Paper Mill Employees Not to Quit Trade Union

On December 11, independent media reported that approximately 119 employees of a state-run paper mill in Dobrush, Gomel region (reftel) decided not to quit the pro-government Forestry Industry Workers Union after management promised to increase pay and leave for employees engaged in hazardous work. Management also agreed to pay wages on time and make amendments to rules governing wage pay rates for basic and overtime working hours. A total of 130 employees had filed an application for withdrawal from the trade union.

¶12. Dranchuk Expected to be Paroled on December 22

On December 14, independent media reported that a supervisory commission of Minsk's Frunzensky District Executive Committee decided to release political prisoner Timofey Dranchuk on parole on December 22. The Frunzensky District Court will need to approve the decision formally. Timofey Dranchuk was sentenced to prison with Nikolay Astreiko, Aleksandr Shalaiko and Enira Bronitskaya on August 4, 2006 on charges of running the unregistered election observation organization "Partnerstvo" (Partnership).

----- ELECTIONS -----

¶13. UCP Leader Lebedko Registered for Election

On December 14, independent media reported that senior member of the union of democratic forces and leader of the United Civic

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Party Anatoly Lebedko was registered as a candidate for the Minsk city council. He expects to face two pro-government candidates. Lebedko's party nominated him after authorities denied registration to his nomination group.

¶14. Only Five Oppositionists Registered in Gomel

On December 14 independent media reported that the Gomel city election commission granted five out of 21 opposition nominees registration to compete for seats on the City Soviet. The candidates include two members of the United Civic Party, a member of each of the Belarusian Popular Front, the Conservative Christian Party and the Belarusian Party of Communists. The 16 other candidacies were allegedly denied for fraudulent data or signatures.

----- INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT -----

¶15. Russia to Apply Export Duty on Petroleum

On December 13, independent media reported on Russia's decision to apply full export duties on crude oil and petroleum products bound for Belarus. Chairman of the Standing Committee on Industry Anatoliy Pavlovich stated that the December 12 decree by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov undermines the very idea of the Belarusian-Russian Union State. Pavlovich claimed the decision would "complicate the situation" both within Belarus and between the two nations.

¶16. Price of Electricity Imports to Increase

On December 13, following Ukraine's warning to Belarus that it would cut electricity supplies to the country on January 1 if an agreement to pay a higher price was not met, Ukrainian Fuel and Energy Ministry Spokesman Mikhailo Hryshchenko announced that a preliminary agreement had been reached. With electricity currently being sold to Belarus at the lowest price of all importers (USD .021/kWh), Ukraine felt the need to end the "subsidy." The preliminary agreement sets the price at Ukraine's domestic price of USD .04 for the first six months of 2007. Belarus imported 2.5 billion kWh of electricity from Ukraine last year and had planned, before the increase, to maintain the level of imported power.

----- DOMESTIC ECONOMY -----

¶17. Product Labeling Requirement Comes Into Force

On December 8, a new requirement for labeling footwear, tea, coffee, mobile phones, audio and videotapes, CDs and DVDs with supplier identification marks came into effect. The requirement, issued in May by the Council of Ministers, intends to stop illegal imports and increase tax revenues. Failure to label products with a supplier identification mark, which costs USD .009, is punishable by a fine of up to USD 290.40.

----- QUOTE OF THE WEEK -----

¶18. MP Suggests Sterilizing Alcoholic Parents

On December 10, lawmaker Viktor Kuchinsky advocated the forced sterilization and transfer of alcoholic parents to "special camps" in the Chernobyl exclusion zone on the following grounds:

"Those born to drink will never become sober. An important thing is to stop fearing to raise problems that require a surgical rather than medical intervention."

STEWART